

Secretary of the Navy

**Press Briefing with Acting Secretary Thomas B. Modly and Admiral
Michael Gilday**

Speakers:
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Chief of Naval Operations

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ACTING SECRETARY THOMAS B. MODLY: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you again for your diligence and your courage in keeping the American people informed as all – as we all deal with the profound ramifications and rapid developments associated with this virus crisis.

I am here today to inform you that today, at my direction, the commanding officer of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, Captain Brett Crozier, was relieved of command by Carrier Strike Group Commander Rear Admiral Stuart Baker. The executive officer, Captain Dan Keeler, has assumed command temporarily until such time as Rear Admiral Select Carlos Sardiello arrives in Guam to assume command. Rear Admiral Select Sardiello is the former commanding officer of the Theodore Roosevelt, so he's extremely well-acquainted with the ship, many members of its crew, and the operations and the capabilities of the ship itself. He is the best person in the Navy right now to take command under these unusual circumstances.

As the secretary of the Navy, I could not be more proud of our men and women serving as part of the Navy and Marine Corps team right now. I can assure you that no one cares more than I do about their safety and welfare. I myself have a son in uniform right now who's currently serving on active duty in Korea, flying missions every day in one of the – one of the nations that was one of the first ones to have a significant spike in the coronavirus case. I understand both as a parent and a veteran how critical our support lines are for the health and well-being of our people, especially now in the midst of this global pandemic.

But there's a larger strategic context, one full of national security imperatives of which all of our commanders must all be aware of today. While we may not be at war in a traditional sense, neither are we truly at peace. Authoritarian regimes are on the rise. Many nations are reaching in many ways to reduce our capacity to accomplish our own strategic national goals. This is actively happening every day. It's been a long time since the Navy and Marine Corps team has faced this broad array of capable global strategic challengers. A more agile and a more resilient mentality is necessary up and down the chain of command. Perhaps more so now than in the recent past, we require commanders with judgment, maturity, and leadership composure under pressure to understand the ramifications of their actions within that larger dynamic strategic context.

We all understand and cherish our responsibilities, and frankly our love for all of our people in uniform. But to allow those emotions to color our judgment when communicating the current operational picture can at best create unnecessary confusion and at worst provide an incomplete picture of American combat readiness to our adversaries.

When the commanding officer of the USS Teddy Roosevelt decided to write his letter on the 30th of March 2020, that outlined his concern for his crew in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Department of the Navy had already mobilized significant resources for days in response to his previous requests. On the same day marked on his letter, my chief of staff called the CO directly at my direction to ensure he had all the resources necessary for the health and safety of his crew. The CO told my chief of staff that he was receiving those resources and he was fully aware of the Navy's response, only asking that he wished the crew could be evacuated faster. My chief of staff ensured that the CO knew that he had an open line to me at any time for

him to call. He even called the – he even called the CO again a day later to follow up, and at no time did the CO relay the various levels of alarm that I, along with the rest of the world, learned from his letter when it was published by the CO's hometown newspaper two days later.

Once I read the letter, I immediately called the chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gilday, and the commander U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Aquilino. Admiral Gilday had just read the letter that morning as well, and Admiral Aquilino had just received it the day before – and of course, we're dealing with time zone changes. We had a teleconference within minutes of me reading the letter – the article, including with the commander of the Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral Bill Merz, Admiral Aquilino, Admiral Gilday, the Department of the Navy surgeon general – Rear Admiral Bruce Gillingham – and others. That evening we held another teleconference with the entire chain of command.

The next day I spoke directly with the CO of the Teddy Roosevelt, and this morning I've spoken to the Teddy Roosevelt's Carrier Strike Group commander, Rear Admiral Stuart Baker. Rear Admiral Baker did not know about the letter before it was sent to him via email from the commanding officer. It's important to understand that the strike group commander, the CO's immediate boss, is embarked on the Theodore Roosevelt with him, right down the passageway. The letter was sent over nonsecure, unclassified email even though – even though the ship possesses some of the most sophisticated communications equipment in the fleet. And it wasn't just sent up the chain of command; it was sent and copied to a broad array of other people. It was sent outside of the chain of command. At the same time, the rest of the Navy was fully responding. Worse, the captain's actions made his sailors, their families, and many in the public believe that his letter was the only reason help from our larger Navy family was forthcoming, which was hardly the case.

Command is a sacred trust that must be continually earned, both from sailors and Marines – from the sailors and Marines that one leads and from the institution that grants that special and honored privilege. As I learned more about the events over the past week onboard the Teddy Roosevelt, including my personal conversations with the strike group commander, commander Seventh Fleet, commander U.S. Pacific Fleet, and the chief of Naval Operations, and Captain Crozier and myself, I could reach no other conclusion that Captain Crozier had allowed the complexity of his challenge with the COVID breakout on the ship to overwhelm his ability to act professionally when acting professionally was what was needed most at the time. We do and we should expect more from the commanding officer of our aircraft carriers.

I did not come to this decision lightly. I have no doubt in my mind that Captain Crozier did what he thought was in the best interest of the safety and well-being of his crew. Unfortunately, it did the opposite. It unnecessarily raised alarms with the families of our sailors and Marines with no plan to address those concerns. It raised concerns about the operational capabilities and operational security of that ship that could have emboldened our adversaries to seek advantage. And it undermined the chain of command, who had been moving and adjusting as rapidly as possible to get him the help he needed.

For these reasons, I lost confidence in his ability to continue to lead that warship as it fights through this virus to get the crew healthy and so that it continue(s) to meet its important

national security requirements. In my judgment, relieving him of command was in the best interests of the United States Navy and the nation in this time when the nation needs the Navy to be strong and confident in the face of adversity.

The responsibility for this decision rests with me. I expect no congratulations for it and it gives me no pleasure in making it. Captain Crozier is an honorable man who, despite this uncharacteristic lapse of judgment, has dedicated himself throughout a lifetime of incredible service to our nation, and he should be proud of that, as we all are.

Pursuant to this action and with my full support, the chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gilday, has directed the vice chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Robert Burke, to conduct an investigation into the circumstances and the climate across the entire Pacific Fleet to help determine what may have contributed to this breakdown in the chain of command. We must ensure we can count on the right judgment, professionalism, composure, and leadership from our commanding officers everywhere in our Navy and our Marine Corps team, but especially in the Western Pacific. I have no indication that there is a broader problem in this regard, but we have an obligation to calmly and evenly investigate it nonetheless.

To our commanding officers – and this is an important message to our commanding officers – it would be a mistake to view this decision as somehow not supportive of your duty to report problems, request help, protect your crews, challenge assumptions as you see fit. This decision is not one of retribution. It is about confidence. It is not an indictment of character, but rather of judgment. While I do take issue with the validity of some of the points in Captain Crozier's letter, he was absolutely correct in raising them. It was the way in which he did it – by not working through and with his strike group commander to develop a strategy to resolve the problems he raised, by not sending the letter to and through his chain of command and to people outside his chain of command, by not protecting the sensitive nature of the information contained within the letter appropriately, and lastly by not reaching out to me directly to voice his concerns after that avenue had been clearly provided to him through my team – that was unacceptable to me.

Let me be clear to all the commanding officers out there: You all have a duty to be transparent with your respective chains of command even if you fear they might disagree with you. This duty requires courage, but it also requires a respect for that chain of command, and a respect for the sensitivity of the information you decide to share and the manner in which you choose to share it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to send a message to the crew of the Theodore Roosevelt and their families back here at home. I am entirely convinced that your commanding officer loves you and that he had you at the center of his heart and mind in every decision that he has made. I also know that you have great affection and love for him as well. But it is my responsibility to ensure that his love and concern for you is matched, if not exceeded by, his sober and professional judgment under pressure. You deserve that throughout all the dangerous activities for which you train so diligently, but most importantly for all those situations which are unpredictable and are hard to plan for.

It's important because you are the TR. You are the big stick. And what happens onboard the TR matters far beyond the physical limits of your hull. Your shipmates across the fleet need to know – need to know for you that you will be strong and ready. And most especially, right now they need to know that you're going to be courageous in the face of adversity. The nation needs to know that the big stick is undaunted and unstoppable, and that you will stay that way as long as the Navy helps you through this COVID-19 challenge.

Our adversaries need to know this as well. They respect and fear the big stick, and they should. We will not allow anything to diminish that respect and fear as you and the rest of our nation fights through this virus.

As I stated, we are not at war by traditional measures, but neither are we at peace. The nation you defend is in a fight right now for our economic, personal, and political security, and you are on the frontlines of that fight in so many ways. You can offer comfort to your fellow citizens who are struggling and fearful here at home by standing the watch and working your way through this pandemic with courage and optimism, and set the example for the nation. We have an obligation to ensure you have everything you need as fast as we can get it there, and you have my commitment that that's what we will do and we're not going to let you down.

The nation you have sworn to defend is in a fight, and the nations and bad actors around the world who wish us harm should understand that the big stick is in the neighborhood and that her crew is standing the watch.

Thank you, and I'm ready to answer your questions.

MODERATOR: Admiral Gilday, did you have a comment?

ADMIRAL MICHAEL GILDAY: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

The secretary of the Navy has lost confidence in the commanding officer of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, and I support the secretary in his decision to relieve Captain Crozier. I have been given every opportunity every step of the way to provide my advice to the secretary as he came to this decision. That is why we're taking this action today, as well as initiating an investigation into the events that unfolded aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt.

Make no mistake: Nobody cares more about our sailors and those aboard the Theodore Roosevelt than our leadership in the Navy. Our sailors deserve the best leadership that we can absolutely provide. And as I said yesterday at this podium, being a commanding officer brings with it an extraordinary responsibility, and that responsibility is absolute. We place a great deal of trust and confidence in our commanding officers, and rely on them to manage risk and make decisions that are fact-based, all the while communicating honestly with their chain of command. We trust them to calmly and unemotionally take action in the face of the most challenging circumstances.

We want our commanding officers to tell us when things aren't going well so we can help address potential problems. We want them to tell their chain of command what they need. We want them to tell the truth. Trust up and down our chain of command is the bond that keeps us steady.

As military men and women, we prepare daily to deal with adversity, uncertainty, and conflict. Americans depend on us for security. We will not let them down. Thank you.

Q: Mr. Secretary, if you could explain, yesterday I left with the impression that he appropriately went through the chain of command, but if it was found that he leaked the letter that would be a problem. Do you believe that he leaked the letter? Because you alluded to the fact that it was his hometown paper. And how do you respond to some of the families and some of the sailors on the ship who say he was just speaking truth to power?

SEC. MODLY: Well, I have no information nor am I trying to suggest that he leaked the information. It was – it was published in The San Francisco Chronicle. It all came as a big surprise to all of us that it was – that it was in the – in the paper. That's the first time I had seen it. Admiral Gilday is pretty much in the same boat. He received the email from Admiral Aquilino and it was already in the CHINFO clips I think that morning. So that's the answer to that question.

I'm not making any suggestion about that. I don't know. I don't think I'll ever know who leaked the information. What I will say, he sent it out pretty broadly, and in sending it out pretty broadly he did not take care to ensure that it couldn't be leaked, and that's part of his responsibility in my opinion.

And then your second question?

Q: The sort of families and sailors saying he was just speaking truth to power rather than trying to sort of –

SEC. MODLY: Well, of course, and I mean, we – I mean, look, I know that – as I mentioned before, the families of the sailors want the CO to be looking out for the well-being of the sailors. We have a responsibility to look out for them as well, but also for – to guard our national security mission and all the other sailors that are out on all the other ships out there that may be put at risk by the actions of a particular commanding officer. So that's the bottom line for me.

MODERATOR: (Inaudible) – we'll come to you next.

Q: Yes. Sir, I'm trying to understand, did you not receive the letter before it appeared in the paper? Did it not go up the chain of command? Because it was our impression that the letter had been sent up the chain of command. So that's a big confusing. And what – how does this not have a chilling effect on other Navy captains who are concerned? I mean, he was concerned about the health and welfare of those on the ship.

SEC. MODLY: Yes. And we want all of our captains to be that way, to be concerned. I trust that it won't have a chilling effect. I hope that what this will do, it was to reinforce the fact that we have the proper way of handling this. What he did by doing this and not being careful with who that information went to – and you're right, it did go to his – to the task group commander, to Admiral Aquilino, to the air boss. But it was copied to 20 or 30 other people, OK? That's just not acceptable. He did not take care. And what that did is it created a panic on – a little bit of a panic on the ship, because it was – the ship was not prepared – the chief petty officers were not prepared to answer questions from the crew in terms of how bad the situation was. It misrepresented the facts of what was going on on the ship as well. And at the same time, the families here in the United States were panicked about the reality.

The reality of what's happening on the ship right now is we have about 114 sailors who have tested positive. I can tell you with great certainty there's going to be more. They'll probably be in the hundreds. Of the 114 sailors, not a single one of them has been hospitalized or has had the requirement to be hospitalized. They're all – the ones that are sick are exhibiting mild or moderate flu symptoms, some of them are exhibiting no symptoms, and some of them have already recovered from the virus – from the effects of the virus. So it raised alarm bells unnecessarily. It also created the impression that the Navy was not responding to his questions. And as I mentioned, my chief of staff was in contact with him a day before he even sent that email saying: Hey, can we do – are we doing everything you need? Can we do more? What can we do? Things were flowing into theater.

I mean, just to give you an example, when the ship got there we didn't have any beds to take people off to. A week later we have already 3,000 places for these sailors to go. That's in a week. And that's not because of this letter. It's because of stuff that was going on well before the letter was sent. And so that's what frustrating, because what it does, it undermines our efforts and the chain of command's efforts to address this problem and creates a panic. And creates a perception that the Navy's not on the job, the government's not on the job. And it's just not true.

MODERATOR: Courtney, you can have the next one.

Q: I'm curious why you took the time in your opening statement, in your prepared remarks, to say that it was published in his hometown paper if you're not alleging that he was the one that leaked it. I just have to ask. And then, and if it hadn't been reported in the media, then why – then would this – would none of this have happened? Your problem is he reported it, he provided this information to too many people. And so it got out. If he had provided it to too many people but it hadn't been reported in the media, would we not be sitting here discussing this right now? And then finally did you have any pressure – I know this was your decision and you directed the action – but did you have any pressure from the White House, or from DOD, from Secretary Esper to do this today?

SEC. MODLY: OK. So with respect to the hometown paper, that's a statement of fact. I have no information about whether or not he had anything to do with that. I do know that he did not safeguard that information and – to keep it from being leaked anywhere. That's step one. So I'm not alleging that. I apologize if that's what the statement is insinuating. That's not the case.

Your second question?

Q: Was had it not been reported in the media would we not be sitting here right now? Is that really why you're angry, that it –

SEC. MODLY: No. I think I made that very clear in my statement, that we want that information coming up to us so that we can take action on it. That goes up through the chain of command, through his chain of command, so we could take action on it. No, I would – my perspective on this? If he had walked in with that list of concerns to his immediate supervisor and said: Hey, let's work together on this, and they worked together on it, and the list didn't change, we would not be here talking about this and that commanding officer would probably still be in command right now.

Q: And then White House and DOD? Did you receive –

SEC. MODLY: I received absolutely no pressure. I've had no communication with the White House about this. I did – when I – when I was arriving closer to this determination yesterday I called Secretary Esper and told him that this was the direction I was headed. And he told me that he would support my decision, whatever that might be.

MODERATOR: All right. Last question. Ryan Brown.

Q: Sir, just really to hit this home, why are you – is he being relieved because he CC'ed too many people on this letter? That's what it kind of makes it seem like now. Is that why he's being relieved?

SEC. MODLY: Because, to me, that demonstrated extremely poor judgment in the middle of a crisis because what it's done it's just created a firestorm. It's created doubts about the ship's ability to go to sea if it needs to. It's created doubt among the families about the health of their sailors, and that was a completely unnecessary thing to do in the midst of a crisis.

So when I have a commanding officer who's responsible for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier with all that lethality and all that responsibility who exercises that poor judgment in a situation, in a crisis like this – now, granted, they don't train for this. But we expect more from our COs than what they train for. We expect them to exercise good judgment that does not put their crews in jeopardy, does not jeopardize the national security mission of the United States.

Q: Give us a sense of where the emails went. Did it go to civilians? Family members? The press? The numbers and where those –

SEC. MODLY: I'm not going to comment on that.

MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, very much.

Q: Because you don't know or you don't want to tell us?

SEC. MODLY: No, I know.

Q: Right.

SEC. MODLY: I know. I'm not going to comment on that.

Q: Well, lastly, just one more. You've said some of the things he said in the letter were correct, but I think you said the language he used was just not something you would have. Can you expand on that? What was in his letter that –

SEC. MODLY: Well, I think you raise a particular level of alarm when you say that 50 people on the – on the crew are going to die, OK? No one knows that to be true. It does not comport with the data we have right now on the ship, and if we take the actions we're going to take, hopefully, not. I spoke with him yesterday about this. I said, how are you feeling? Do you feel like you have enough ventilators? Clearly, if people are going to die that means you need enough ventilators. He said, oh, sir, I feel comfortable we have enough ventilators here. How many do you have? Six. I said, that's going to be enough? That does not comport with a death statistic that says 50 people are going to die. So there are – there are data that I've gathered in my discussions with him, with others, as well as the facts that lead me to believe that we can have a better CO right now to help deal with this crisis.

Q: So you both mentioned emotion. Do you think he was just too emotional over this?

SEC. MODLY: I don't know what motivated him. I just know that it exercised extremely poor judgment.

MODERATOR: (Inaudible) – thank you very much.

Q: But you also said he did something correct as well. What was correct in that –

MODERATOR: Tom, thank you very much.

SEC. MODLY: I can answer this. I'll answer this. What –

Q: This is an important issue, by the way.

SEC. MODLY: Yeah. What he did –

Q: (Inaudible) – question.

SEC. MODLY: What he did that was correct was recognize the situation, recognize that he needed to communicate what was going on on the ship, OK? The manner in which he did it, the manner in which he chose to do it – not going directly to his strike group commander who's right down the hall from him and talking it through – is the reason I have a problem, OK?

Q: Can I just ask you, though, you know, every time we hear about this ship we hear the same sentiments from Navy leaders and I believe from OSD leaders and that that, well, no one has – all the symptoms are mild, at worst, moderate. Is it possible he didn't think that when he was going to leadership that they were taking – that you, candidly, or leaders were taking it seriously enough, that if it – if people didn't stop the spread that it could get more serious and people could die and maybe that's why he took this action?

SEC. MODLY: No, because – no. Well, I don't know – I don't know why he took that – I don't know why he took that action, OK? What I do know is that he was fully aware that the 7th Fleet commander, the Pac Fleet commander, were flowing resources to him. What he communicated to my chief of staff was that the only help he could need was to try and get the stuff there faster. That's it, OK? That's the extent of it. To me, that's a phone – that's a phone call to Admiral Aquilino. It's a walk down the hallway to your commanding officer. It's not a blast out email to anybody who he knows about the situation.

Q: Were you already planning to take 3,000 sailors off the ship when he sent the letter or is that only as a result of his letter?

SEC. MODLY: That's how the strategy evolved once the ship got in place. That's correct. We determined we were going to take a very methodical approach to this. As I mentioned to you before, the ship requires a certain number of people to man it. It's got two nuclear power plants on it. It's got weapons. It's got ammunition. You have to have a certain number of people on there.

It's about 10 percent of the ship at any one time. But you can't have all those 10 percent of the people on. You have to have a watch rotation. So it's about 7(00) to 800 people to a thousand people that you need to have ready. So we took those people off first, the people that we could fill those bills, make sure that they're clean, and we'll slowly start bringing them back on the ship. In the meantime, we freed up 2,700 – 1,700 additional hotel rooms in the city, in the state of Guam, to take people off faster, and this was all in the works when this was going on. And that's going to be the last question, OK? Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you all very much.

(END)